Why England May Not Rejoin the European Union

A Historical Expoloration Of Its Barriers to European Reintegration

Written by Wolfgang Geissler – Treasurer and Board member of the Austro-British Society

INTRODUCTION

England's estrangement from the European Union is not simply a political event of the 21st century, but the product of deep historical divergence. While continental Europe was repeatedly unified under imperial structures – Roman, Papal, Carolingian, and Holy Roman – England developed separately: politically insular, legally distinct, and culturally resistant to supranational authority.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify why this paper refers to **England** specifically rather than the **United Kingdom**. The 2016 Brexit referendum revealed significant internal divisions: while England and, to a lesser extent, Wales voted to leave the EU, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted decisively to remain. Scotland, in particular, continues to express a strong desire to rejoin the European Union, even if that would one day require independence from the UK. Wales has also shown increasing ambivalence toward Brexit in recent years.

The use of "England" in this analysis is thus deliberate. England has historically shaped the dominant narrative behind Brexit and remains the cultural and political heart of Euroscepticism. This paper is not a critique of England, nor is it fuelled by nostalgia or resentment. On the contrary: it reflects a sincere hope that England might one day return to the European fold – not despite her unique traditions, but in full recognition of them. Yet for the reasons outlined below, such a return would require not just political will, but a profound cultural reorientation.

This paper argues that England's difficulty in rejoining the EU lies not merely in sovereignty or economic calculations, but in the absence of what might be called the 'imperial tradition of shared rule' that characterises much of Europe. In doing so, we contrast England's historical path with that of the continental experience – particularly the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, and the Papacy's efforts to preserve Western unity after the fall of Rome.

ENGLAND AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

While England remained outside the continental imperial traditions, she would in time create an empire of her own – one built not on shared sovereignty with European neighbours, but on the domination of overseas territories. The British Empire was maritime, expansive, and centred on Westminster, not Rome or Vienna. This imperial experience fostered a different conception of power: one based on control, not integration; on singularity, not plurality.

Unlike France, Germany, or Austria, England never participated in the imperial structures that shaped Europe's political fabric. From the Roman Empire through the Papal-Christian order and the decentralised Holy Roman Empire to the supranational ethos of the Habsburg Monarchy, continental Europe developed a tradition of layered sovereignty. These frameworks were grounded in law, subsidiarity, and coexistence under higher authority.

England, by contrast, evolved as a sovereign island nation. After the fall of Roman Britain, it was never again governed by an external continental authority. The English common law, parliamentary sovereignty, the break with Rome during the Reformation, and a global rather than continental orientation forged a distinct identity – one sceptical of shared rule or supranational governance. Its political culture developed with an instinctive wariness of submitting to any higher legal order.

THE IMPERIAL LEGACY OF EUROPEAN UNITY

The modern EU is often misunderstood in Britain as a bureaucratic construct. Yet its roots lie in Europe's long history of imperial governance. From Rome's administrative order to Charlemagne's Christian empire and the Holy Roman Empire's confederal model, continental Europeans internalised the idea that multiple peoples could be united under a single legal and institutional framework without losing their identities.

Charlemagne's coronation in 800 AD, performed by Pope Leo III in Rome, marked a turning point: the rebirth of empire in the West, not merely as a political institution, but as a Christian and symbolic project. The idea of *translatio imperii* – the transfer of legitimate imperial authority – created a tradition that would echo into the modern EU. England stood apart from this, never fully participating in the continental imperial consciousness that grew from such moments.

To further illustrate how differing historical experiences shape contemporary attitudes toward supranational governance, it is helpful to consider other European nations—like Hungary and Poland—whose trajectories diverge from both the continental mainstream and from England's path.

HUNGARY AS A PARALLEL CASE

Hungary presents a revealing contrast. Though part of the Habsburg Monarchy and culturally Catholic, it was never in the Holy Roman Empire and long resisted Vienna's centralisation. Its constitutional tradition, shaped by the Golden Bull and a strong national diet, fostered a scepticism toward supranational authority that still colours its tense relationship with the EU. Like England, Hungary lacks the imperial habit of shared sovereignty – a contrast to Germany or Austria, where centuries under imperial rule nurtured a cultural memory of federal coexistence.

POLAND: A DISTINCT LEGACY

Poland's case is also instructive. As a major power in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it developed a tradition of elective monarchy and *liberum veto* – a form of noble autonomy that prioritised local sovereignty over central authority. Though Catholic and part of Christendom, Poland experienced partitions and foreign domination rather than participation in shared imperial structures. Today, its ambivalence toward EU authority stems less from historical integration than from a deeply ingrained defence of national self-determination – different again from both England's insular tradition and Hungary's constitutional autonomy.

THE REFORMATION AND THE LOSS OF CONTINENTAL UNITY

Equally significant is the contrasting meaning of 'empire' across European traditions. For Austrians and Germans steeped in the legacy of the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy, 'Reich' signified a supranational legal and cultural order – not domination, but coexistence under imperial law. The Reichsidee evoked unity in diversity, law above nations, and collective identity within pluralism.

In England, by contrast, 'empire' typically refers to the British Empire – a vast colonial structure governed from the metropole, often with little regard for local autonomy. In France, empire often conjures the centralised, expansionist legacy of Napoleon. Thus, while Central Europeans may see the EU as a lawful continuation of an old supranational idea, English or French historical memory offers less resonance with that vision.

The English Reformation severed England not only from the Catholic Church but from the last institution that linked it to continental Christendom. While Protestantism flourished across the Holy Roman Empire within a shared imperial legal framework, England created a national church under royal authority. This reinforced the idea that England was to be self-contained – spiritually, politically, and legally. Such a path diverged sharply from the integrationist traditions still latent in the continental imagination.

WHY REJOINING THE EU IS HISTORICALLY DIFFICULT FOR ENGLAND

Rejoining the EU would require England to overcome deep-rooted traditions. It means re-accepting the primacy of EU law, relinquishing unfettered parliamentary sovereignty, and adopting principles – like subsidiarity – that emerged from continental, often Catholic, traditions. This is not just politically fraught; it challenges English legal and cultural instincts developed over a millennium.

Moreover, English historical memory lacks a shared imperial framework with the Continent. The idea of yielding to a higher political union is not familiar to a country that views itself as a former imperial centre, not a participant. Where Austrians or Germans might see Brussels as echoing past political orders, many Britons perceive it as foreign rule.

FRANCE: A RELUCTANT ARCHITECT

A brief note on France may be illuminating. France, like England, is not shaped by the supranational traditions of the Holy Roman or Habsburg Empires. Though a founding member of the EU and one of its primary architects, France has occasionally expressed reservations about ceding national authority. Referendums such as the narrow approval of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 reflect an underlying ambivalence. Nonetheless, France remains deeply embedded in the European project, and her hesitations stem from a different place than England's more deep-seated estrangement. In France, scepticism coexists with a continental identity; in England, it often defines the national narrative.

THE LONG WAY HOME

England's estrangement from the European Union is rooted in more than politics. It reflects a divergence of historical experience – one in which the imperial legacy of layered governance shaped the Continent's receptiveness to supranationalism, while England forged a proud, insular identity that resists shared sovereignty.

To rejoin the EU, England would need not only political resolve, but also a cultural reimagining of its role in Europe. That transformation is possible – history shows that civilisations adapt. But the path is long, and it begins with understanding why England left, and why it finds it so hard to return.

About the author

Wolfgang Geissler is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, its Treasurer and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom. In 2009 he settled again in the 3rd district of the City of Vienna

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.